

What Is a School Story and Why Is It Important?

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When we began to plan an issue of our journal around school stories, I confess that we were reacting to the popular Harry Potter books. Set in an English boarding school (albeit in a fantastic world), this series has been considered popular because its protagonists are engaged in hair raising adventures and are pretty much on their own. Many of their parents are also graduates of the school, and they never seem to visit or to disapprove of what happens to their children while they are there. Harry's parents, of course, are dead. Was this, we wondered, the kind of setting contemporary authors tended to use when they wrote about school life? Though we could see that the Harry Potter books first evolved from the British classic *Tom Brown's School Days*, first published in 1857, we also realized that they had gained a legacy from the Arthurian legend of Merlin, the wizard who taught King Arthur the ways of the world when he was a youth. What, we wondered, were U.S. publishers releasing that could be immediately identified as "school stories"? What were they building their stories on?

Once we began our journey and discovered what kinds of stories about school life were currently being released, I decided that I wanted to trace U.S. books about schools and see what the stories said to contemporary writers of children's and adolescent literature. Since there are lots of earlier books containing stories about children in schools, I decided to look at the Newbery award books set in a school for clues. Three Newbery award books convinced me that U.S. views about schools and teachers have evolved from stories about student centered education to ones that contain unsafe cautionary worlds where children must struggle to find the truth that is not being presented.

The first story focused on events in a school room that was awarded the Newbery is *The Wheel on the School*, published in 1954. Written by Meindert DeJong and illustrated by Maurice Sendak, this is a gentle novel based on DeJong's childhood in Holland, so U.S. children were being exposed to events that happened within a foreign country some 15 years earlier. Still, since it was given the Newbery award for its distinguished writing, *The Wheel on the School* must hold literary elements U.S. librarians felt were significant in the 1950s. One could quickly label this plot all about collaborative learning, a concept that is currently popular. It also models independent study skills.

DeJong's teacher is kind and attentive, but he is also skilled at getting the students to pursue knowledge on their own. The story begins when Lina, a young student in the class, writes a story—or, DeJong adds, perhaps an essay—on storks and their habits (2).

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Afterward, Lina admits that she knows very little about storks because they don't roost in her home town. The class talks a bit about what they don't know, and then their teacher says, "We can't think much when we don't know much. But we can wonder! From now until tomorrow morning when you come to school again, will you do that? . . . If you'll do that—then school is out right now!" (6). This is certainly a far call from today's public school experience in the United States! Teachers don't often randomly determine curriculum based on student interests, and they cannot dismiss their classes at any hour unless they meet local and state requirements.

In 1982, Morrow published *Dear Mr. Henshaw* by Beverly Cleary, and at long last one of America's favorite children's authors won the Newbery. Cleary's earlier Beezus and Ramona books also depicted children attending school, and they were told from the point of view of the youthful protagonist. Once again, Cleary's central character and perspective is the child's. *Dear Mr. Henshaw* begins with a series of letters written to the author Mr. Henshaw by Leigh, a young boy who from the second grade on, uses one of Henshaw's books for his school projects. It is not until fifth grade that he receives a reply from the author asking him to read another of his books. Once that happens, Leigh's reading takes off. Leigh ties other books not only to school assignments but to his family life. When Mr. Henshaw tires of writing to Leigh, he suggests the boy keep a journal as if he were still writing to him. Now Cleary's format changes, and we are engaged in a personal narrative that fulfills Leigh's needs on its own.

Cleary's portrayal of a troubled youngster who finds himself through his writing immediately won teacher approval because it could be used both for independent reading and as a lesson conduit. An educational review written in 2011 stated that Cleary's plot "demonstrates how a boy highly resistant to writing might ultimately discover the joy of putting pencil to page when encouraged to write in a way that is meaningful, personal, and authentic" (77). Several lesson plans can be found on the web for this novel. As I looked at the plans and considered the ways that Leigh wrote both to Mr. Henshaw and for himself, I felt that Beverly Cleary had made less of a case for teacher inspired writing than for illuminating the connections authors can have with their readers. Most authors, however, don't have the time to write to every child who writes them, and many resent the letters that fulfill teacher assignments. Leigh's growth as a writer comes from personal encouragement, something that the individual teacher can inspire if time is taken to include writing genres in classrooms.

Lois Lowry's *The Giver* was published in 1993, and it won the 1994 Newbery award. While the youthful hero is not really a student in a school, he is being tutored much the way Arthur was tutored by Merlin. When Jonas is twelve, he is selected to be the next "receiver" of cultural history for his society. He doesn't read books; he simply listens to the current "Giver" of knowledge and learns what he needs to know. Unfortunately, the cul-

tural understanding that he receives is unsettling and the consequences often unjust. His ending when he takes the ultimate journey past cultural boundaries is left to the reader's interpretation. It seems like a good book to teach, and the web holds over 100,000 entries for "*The Giver* lessons."

But did Lois Lowry expect us to find a predictable story? I don't think so. When she accepted the Newbery award, Lois Lowry explained that she had written the story because she had often looked for satisfying answers to complex questions in the past, though sometimes the secure way of answering her problems was not the most honest. And she explained that not all children who wrote to her had read *The Giver* in the same way. Then she added, "each time a child opens a book, he pushes upon the gate that separates him from elsewhere. It gives him choices. It gives him freedom. These are magnificent, wonderfully unsafe things."

The books you read about in this issue of the journal were ones that at times built on these earlier ideas, and at times simply entertained. We invite you to connect these classical American school stories with the best children's and adolescent literature we felt we found within the recently published "contemporary school stories."

Works Cited

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